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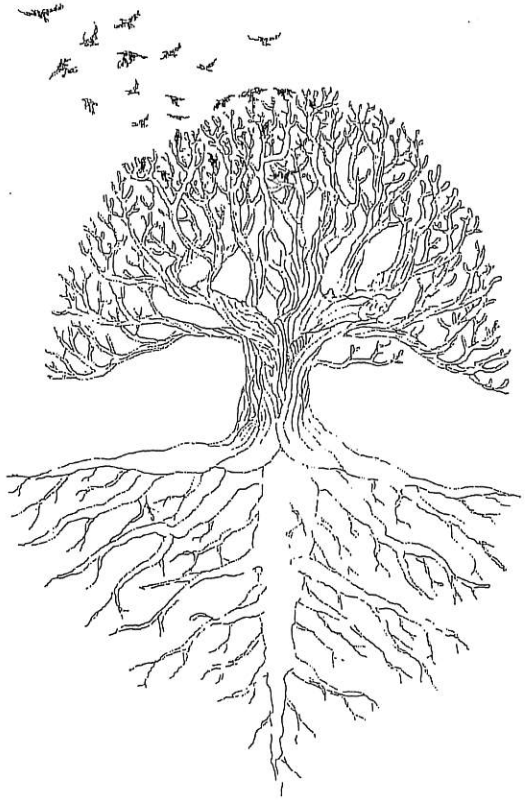
The Treasury of the Commons



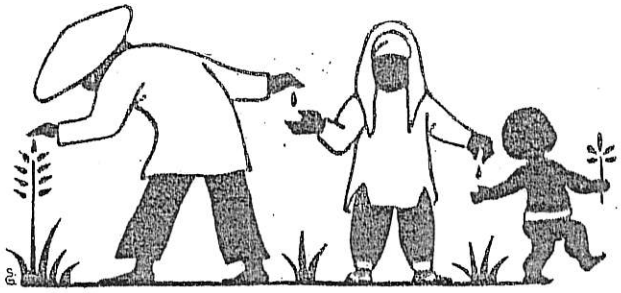
By: Yggdrasil

"Let us not be satisfied with the liberation of Egypt or the subjugation of Malta, but let us subdue Finchley Common, let us conquer Hounslow Heath, let us compel Epping Forest to submit to the yoke of improvement." - British aristocrat, Sir John Sinclair, 1803

One of the cruelest oxymorons of our time is the notion of private property. As a social construct, property only exists because a political authority – usually a hegemonic state in the capitalist context – recognizes and protects the ownership of a good or service by one person against another. Yet, for most people throughout history, the integrity of such entities as air, water, soil, plants, animals, entire ecosystems, and even cultural inventions like languages and traditions were deemed too vital for survival to consign them to the vicious downward spiral of alienation, commodification, and exploitation.

"We make our own maps – maps not of parchment or cyberspace, but of twigs and corn husks, of shells and buckskin, of our bodies lying against the reverberations of history. Maps not of destinations, but of directions and currents, of visions and relationships... Look at them carefully, study them, memorize. Take a deep breath. Now: leave all the maps behind." - Chellis Glendinning, Off the Map, 1999

The Industrial Devolution of the 19th century was only possible in the wake of the 17th century Enclosure Movement. This was when the rich not only violently expropriated the commons from the poor, but "civilization" began to transmogrify the sacred into the mundane, reducing and dissecting all of nature into a resource to peddle. This conflict continues to this day – whether it is between indigenous communities



Probably the most beautiful aspect of reclaiming our commons is that it literally sprouts from bioregionalism and intimately celebrates diversity. Such a deep sense of time, place, and identity helps contextualize our existence on earth and our relationship with others. Indigenous knowledge that is truly native to a specific community can not be extracted, homogenized, and globalized. Drawing upon our own embedded history and creative synergy we can be empowered to create a more respectful and sustainable world. By actively living and generously sharing this experience of the commons we can also encourage others to escape the vapid anomie of the private property theme park.

Thankfully, the commons extend well beyond one's own doorstep, too – think of seeds, recipes, software, music, holidays. Whether one calls it open source, copy left, dumpster diving, or a really FREE free market, the pirate/gift economy thrives all around us. As much as government technocrats and corporate mercenaries may try to formalize, co-opt, and regulate this populist DIY revolution, it just slips through the dead fingers of their iron gloves. Ukrainian hackers are now helping U.S. family farmers fix their own tractors after John Deere patented their online repair manual. Hakim Bey's temporary autonomous zone (TAZ) is incessantly evolving into new unexpected forms of expression and resistance – insurgent websites, counter cultural happenings, local currencies, urban guerrilla gardening. At some unique time/space junctures these projects can shift human history - such as the protest takeover of the State Capitol in WI in 2011 or the resistance community at Standing Rock in SD in 2016. In other places they even metamorphize into quasi permanent praxis – Christiania, Denmark; Oaxaca & Chiapas; Rojava, Syria – a vibrant inspirational glimpse that another world is possible.

"As an imaginative method of domination (private property) has worked well in forcing us to believe that the land upon which we stand belongs to this fictive concept of "owner," but by acts of will it is possible to transcend ourselves and the cop in our head." – Anders Corr, Fall 1994 issue of Kick It Over!

"England is not a free people, till the poor that have no land, have a free allowance to dig and labour the commons..."
Gerrard Winstanley, 1649

resisting the resource grabbing of multinational corporations at Standing Rock and across the rest of the Americas, between homeless families and gentrifying condolords in Chicago or Madison, or between family farmers saving their own seeds and biotech giants scheming to patent all forms of life. Only in the belly of the beast would one find free marketeers gloating over the "entrepreneurship" of AOL Time Warner which for decades was able extort up to $5,000 per day in royalties from hapless people singing the Happy Birthday song which they claimed they "owned."

"To remove land from the market is synonymous with the incorporation of land with definite institutions such as the homestead, the cooperative, the factory, the township, the school, the church, parks, wildlife preserves, and so on...The passing of market economy can become the beginning of an era of unprecedented freedom." - Karl Polanyi, Great Transformation, 1944

Pick up any conventional neoclassical economics textbook, and you will find Garret Hardin's 1968 Science essay trundled out as "proof" that we need to privatize everything. The only thing that is tragic about the "tragedy of the commons," though, is that so many people still believe this absurd story. Are human beings really nothing more than greedy atomized utilitarians, hell bent to squeeze the most profit out of mother nature – and each other - as fast as they can? Thankfully, the first woman to win the Nobel Economics Prize in 2009, Elinor Ostrom, comes from a different school of economic thinking (institutionalism) which points out that cooperative structures built around common property are actually more productive and efficient than competitive markets predicated upon privatized resources. Think about that for a moment…how much time, energy, money could be saved if people worked together for mutual benefit rather than trying to figure out how best to rip off, back stab, sue, or kill each other?

"With spades and hoes and plows, stand up now, stand up now. With spades and hoes and plows, stand up now. Your freedom to uphold, seeing cavaliers are bold, to kill you if they could, and rights from you to hold. Stand up now Diggers all." - verse from the 14th century Diggers' Song

Those of us who live in housing cooperatives – which are over 1 million people now in the U.S. – often make light of the commons – how often have you heard the joke, "we own it, so let's trash it"? Yet, as an intentional community based upon reciprocity, mutual aid, and solidarity, the cooperative is one of the best sites for the commons to flourish. For instance, the motto of Madison Community Cooperative (MCC) – "housing for people, not for profit" – clearly reflects such principles and stands in sharp contrast to the serf-lord, tenant-owner, peon-boss exploitative power differential we find replicated everywhere in the capitalist greed-o-rama. Community landtrusts, which now protect over 37 million acres across the U.S. from reckless maldevelopment, extend the realm of the commons even further. And then there are intentional rural communities like Echo Valley and Anathoth Farm in Wisconsin which have created a safe space for sustainable agricultural and social transformation. And, of course, there are the tribal lands and treaty rights of indigenous peoples whose seventh generation principle still guides their decision making over those territories that still under their sovereignty.

"If all wisdom was acquired from without, it might be politic for us to make our culture cosmopolitan. But I believe our best wisdom does not come from without, but arises in the soul and is an emanation of the earth spirit, a voice speaking directly to us dwellers in the land." – Irish revolutionary, AE, in 1922

creative commons